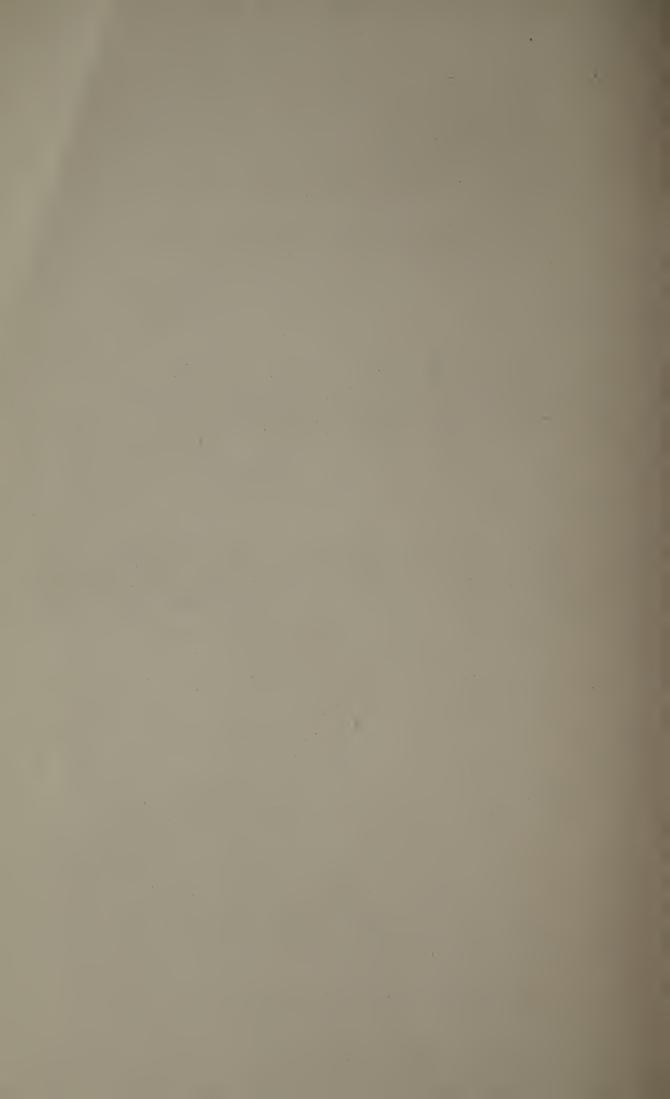
ROBBING THE STEAMCARS

BYS. H HOLBROOK



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BY S. H. HOLBROOK

From THE STORY OF AMERICAN RAILROADS by Stewart H. Holbrook.

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FOREWORD

The Reno gang, infamous Hoosier outlaws of the 1860's, planned and committed the first train robbery in the United States near Seymour, Indiana, on October 6, 1866.

The following publication, describing the era of train robbers and robberies in nineteenth-century America, originally appeared as chapter 33 of THE STORY OF AMERICAN RAILROADS by Stewart H. Holbrook. The volume was published by Crown Publishers, Inc., in 1947. The publisher has graciously granted permission to reprint.

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ONLY a rash man would assert the name of the first train robber to operate in the United States, but the first formal holdup of a train of steam cars appears to have been accomplished on the 6th of October, 1866, by a crew of Hoosiers who thought it up, then put it into practice on the Ohio & Mississippi Railway near Seymour, in Jackson County, Indiana.

This first stickup was a simple job. A passenger train carrying an express and baggage car pulled out of Seymour in early evening, heading east, and almost immediately two masked men came into the express car from the coach just behind. In those days it hadn't occurred to expressmen to lock their car's doors, so the entry was made without fuss. The two men secured the messenger's keys, opened his safe, took out some \$13,000, then pulled the bellcord to signal the engineer to stop. Stop he did, and the robbers dumped another safe, unopened, from the car, and leaped after it into the darkness.

This was something new. The train crew hardly knew what was expected of them. They discussed the event wonderingly, then took the train to the next station. Here an armed posse was recruited. They pumped their way on a handcar back to the scene of the crime, to find only the unopened safe, which had been too much for the robbers. Such was the holdup. A bit later, and doubtless with good reason, John and Simeon Reno, brothers of questionable habits, and Frank Sparks, no better than he should be, were arrested, indicted for the crime, and admitted to bail. Their trial was postponed from time to time and was never held.

Then, almost a year later, the same eastbound train was held up and robbed, again near Seymour, in the same manner, by two imitative souls named Walker Hammond and Michael Collins. It was believed that the Reno boys, of whom there were four "bad" ones in all, were behind the

second holdup. Pinkerton detectives managed to lay hands on John Reno and this time he was sent to the pen, though on exactly what charges I do not know.

What by now was becoming known as the Reno Gang presently turned up in Iowa in the burglary business. Captured and put in jail, four of them escaped and worked their way back to God's country of Indiana, where they proceeded to hold up a richly laden train of the Jefferson, Madison & Indianapolis Railroad, taking \$96,000 from two safes in the express car. This time murder was done, for the messenger, beaten and thrown from the moving train, died. In quick succession there were holdups on the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton road, and on the Ohio & Mississippi Valley. Several alleged members of the Reno Gang were arrested and, before they could be tried, were taken by a party of vigilantes and hanged from a tree that was, appropriately enough, right beside a railroad track. And on a November night in 1868, more vigilantes called at the jail in New Albany, Indiana, where three Reno brothers and one Anderson were confined, awaiting trial, and after a stiff fight with the jailer, secured the four men and hanged them from the rafters of the jail. This was the end of the Reno Gang, and their reputation all but died with them. This seems odd to happen to the inventors of a new profession, for if the Renos were, as many contemporary writers claimed, the first to commit train robbery, they were the founders of a typically American institution that was to flourish for the next half century and from which Americans were to draw many of their most popular folk heroes of song and story.*

With the death of the last of the Reno Gang train robbery had a hiatus of almost two years. Then, in 1870, it was revived almost simultaneously in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Nevada. The first holdup was of a Mobile & Ohio train at Moscow, Kentucky, the second of a Nashville & Northwestern express car, the third of an N&N train near Union City, Tennessee. In the latter affair Expressman Morrell was shot through both lungs. The Pinkertons were called in, and this time William and Robert, two sons of old Allan, the founder, took the trail.

The wounded messenger gave descriptions of the robbers that seemed to fit twin brothers, Hilary and Levi Farrington, who had been absent from their homes near Gilman, Tennessee, for some time. The Pinkertons trailed the suspected pair to a tiny hamlet of three or four cabins on the banks of the Mississippi, a sort of Tobacco Road community, fairly crawling with queer characters of odd morals and a vast suspicion of all strangers. Arriving at this simian lair at nightfall, William Pinkerton and a companion approached the largest cabin in the place, which they could see was lighted by a single candle. Pinkerton didn't trouble to knock. He

^{*} For a full account of the Reno boys see Alvin F. Harlow's grand book, Old Waybills, New York, 1934, on which my account rests heavily.



The first stick-up was a simple job.

pushed open the door and walked in. Five men, one woman and a young girl leaped to their feet, the light went out, and the shooting commenced.

Two men escaped by the back door, two surrendered to Pinkerton, and the other man lay dead on the floor. If the Brothers Farrington had been among the party, they were the two men who had escaped. The Pinkertons did not let down; they soon caught Hilary Farrington in Missouri, and Levi in Illinois. This finished the Farrington Gang, which had barely got started anyway.

Nevada saw the next train holdup, on November 5, 1870. Why the event had been delayed so long is not to be rationally explained. For many years past bold road agents had been holding up Western stagecoaches, chiefly to get their hands into the fabulously rich strong boxes of Wells, Fargo & Company, but had not attempted the like on the Central Pacific Railroad, operating now for more than five years. It was long overdue, this first Nevada stickup of a train, which began at Truckee when six men boarded an eastbound train at one o'clock in the morning. When the train stopped at Verdi two of the gang went forward and covered the engine crew. The others took over the express car which gave up a thumping good haul in cash and bullion, close to \$40,000.

On the next night the same train was held up again, this time near Toana, 400 miles to the east, and to the tune of another \$40,000 in cash and bullion. No arrests appear to have been made in connection with these robberies, although at least one of them was popularly laid at the door of Jack Davis, a leading gambler and business man of Virginia City, much revered for his charity to the poor.

That train robbery should break out in Nevada, long celebrated for its lawlessness, was no surprise. It was the next job that astonished the public: Into Messenger Halpine's express car on the Boston & Albany Railroad, one day in 1871, stepped John I. Filkins, a former express company employee. He wantonly shot Halpine twice, robbed the safe, and departed. The incident electrified all New England, which theretofore had got its banditry vicariously from Mr. Beadle's Dime Novel Library.

It was almost time for the great hero of the dime novel writers to appear, the hillbilly they were to magnify to twice his life-size, the thug they were to blow into folklore, even into the chaste pages of the *Dictionary of American Biography*—Jesse Woodson James.*

Perhaps, as folklore has it, Jesse James was "kind to his mother and to little children"—that is, all little children except those who happened to be on the trains that he and his goons wrecked in order to rob. Perhaps, too, as alleged by his apologists, Jesse's youth had been embittered by hardships incident to the Civil War. So had the youth of many another man who did not, however, use it to explain and justify a career of crime.

^{*} Vol. IX, New York, 1932.



He pushed open the door and walked in.

What is a certainty, and no folklore, is that James and his gang showed an indifference to human life that should put him, and possibly them, beyond the pale of consideration as human beings.

Frank and Jesse James were Missourians who had taken up bank robbery in a small way after the Civil War. In some or all of these affairs they were aided by Coleman Younger and on occasion by Younger's brothers, Bob, John and Jim, and other men. None of the gang had been arrested when on July 21, 1873, they made their first bid for national headlines by holding up a train on the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific, near Adair, Iowa. Train holdups, of course, had been going on for many years. The James-Younger contribution to the technique was to wreck the train first.

As this particular Rock Island train sped across the hot summer prairie on that sultry evening, Engineer Rafferty, an excellent man, was at the throttle, his eye on the track, his heart glad that the grain harvest was to be good for the struggling farmers. The tall wheat and the towering corn fled by in the falling twilight, thousands of acres of it, waving in a soft prairie breeze. All seemed well ahead. The shining rails stretched out, true and level, beyond the beam of the great headlight. Then, came a curve and as they rounded it, Rafferty's fireman saw a rope suddenly tauten, then a rail slide out of place. He shouted warning. Rafferty threw his engine into reverse, but there wasn't time. Over keeled the locomotive on its side, crushing poor Rafferty to death. Half a dozen men piled out of the track-side hedge, subdued the train crew, and two of them went through the express safe. The others went through the coaches and sleepers and forced passengers to toss their cash and valuables into a grain sack one of the robbers carried. The total haul was small, estimated at around \$4,000.

Nobody was arrested, but detectives thought that descriptions of the robbers fitted the James and Younger boys rather closely. The gang laid low until January, 1874, when they held up a stagecoach in Arkansas, and two weeks later five of them took over the depot at Gadeshill Station, on the Iron Mountain Railroad in Missouri, tying up the station agent and five loungers who were there to see the steamcars go by. When the steamcars arrived a few minutes later, they were flagged down, and the robbers went through the express safe and also through the passengers.

Soon the Pinkertons were on the case. In a gun battle with some of the Youngers, two Pinkertons were killed, and John Younger shot dead. The James brothers trapped another Pinkerton and killed him. The Pinkertons then made a deplorable mistake in the field of public relations: they heaved a sizable bomb through an open window of the James home in Missouri, thinking to kill Frank and Jesse. Both men happened to be away, but the bomb killed Archie Samuel, a half-brother, and blew off part of the right arm of Mrs. Samuel, the James' boy's mother. It was a most unfortunate affair for the detectives. The press heaped scorn upon them, calling them murderers, and made so great a noise that many persons who had no

sympathy for the James gang became almost their partisans henceforth.

The robbing went on. In December of 1874 six men flagged down a Kansas Pacific train near Muncie, Kansas, just west of Kansas City, by piling the track high with ties. The train stopped and the usual proceedings went on, the gang taking some \$30,000 in cash, bullion, and other valuables from the express car, then working over the passengers. Hard on this job the police of Kansas City arrested one Bud McDaniels who, when sufficiently sober, worked now and then as a railroad brakeman. Bud was packing considerable jewelry, quite a roll of bills, and two big guns. But he wouldn't talk. He escaped from a deputy while being taken to trial and was killed by a posse.

During the next year somebody, and likely the James-Younger crew, stuck up a stage in Texas, and held up a bank in West Virginia. It was surely the James and Youngers who flagged down a Missouri Pacific train on July 7, 1876, not far from Sedalia, shot the cars full of holes just for the hell of it, and robbed safe and passengers—the swag going into the inevitable grain sack, an item never absent from a formal job of the James and Youngers.

Still no arrests were made. It seems incredible that a gang could perform so often, and over so wide an area, for three years and still be almost intact. Even the Pinkertons, who in that day were tough and determined and on the whole able detectives, had been unable to cope with the gang. The explanation surely lies partly in the public attitude toward railroads in the 1870's. It was one largely of fear and hate combined. The roads had done a good deal, as I have attempted to show elsewhere, to bring about this state of affairs. Farmers who felt they had been cheated, either in land deals or in freight rates, were not prone to worrying much if other men preyed on the railroads. Still other men had lost their savings in wildcat railroad stocks and bonds. Many laboring men felt the roads were grinding them down-and in 1877 were to stage a strike and riots the like of which the country had not seen until then. So, the James and the Youngers and their men continued to ride and rob with what in retrospect seems to have been comparative ease and safety. They might have continued their profession for some years to come had they not attempted a raid on the First National Bank of Northfield, Minnesota, a place not to be trifled with.

Northfield was a sleepy college town and a trading center for farmers roundabout, but it harbored a large number of citizens who were prompt to defend their institutions and rights, dead shots, too, who had learned their fighting manners in the interminable Indian wars of the time and place. When Jesse James and seven of his crew rode into Northfield on the pleasant 7th of September, 1876, and went to work on the bank, a young medical student named Henry Wheeler was drowsing on the porch of the Dampier hotel, across the street. Stirred by the untoward noise, Wheeler

got to his feet, went inside, then appeared at a window with an old Army carbine and let fly. In less than two minutes, the street was swarming with men, mostly armed, mostly shooting, and shooting very well. The gang had been unable to get into the vault, and now they started to get out of Northfield, firing in every direction. Calmly taking stances where they could do the best work, the embattled citizens shot three of the vahoos dead-Clell Miller, Bill Stiles, and Sam Wells. They also wounded Cole, Bob, and Jim Younger. Jesse and Frank James, by tactics that some said were more self-preservative than heroic, got away. The Youngers, too, managed to get out of town, while close behind them came a posse of the savagely efficient citizenry. These villagers ran the wounded Youngers to earth on Hanska Slough, in Brown County, took them in tow, and they were put away in the Minnesota penitentiary at Stillwater. Bob died there, Jim committed suicide behind the walls, and Cole was paroled in 1901, to travel with Frank James Wild West Show for a time, and to take to the lecture platform. He died, the last of the gang, in 1915, in bed and with his shoes removed.

Those seven minutes in Northfield were the hottest the James gang ever faced.* The affair wrecked the original gang, and Jesse and Frank lay low for three years, meanwhile, it is alleged, engaging in legitimate business. Yet they weren't quite done with the steamcars. They recruited a number of relatives and friends and on August 7, 1879, stopped and robbed a Chicago & Alton train near Glendale, Missouri. Although their haul wasn't large, and nothing spectacular happened during the holdup, this was the gang's feat that got into balladry.†

Two more train jobs remained. The first was of a Rock Island train, July 15, 1881, at Winston, Missouri, during which two members of the train crew were brutally and needlessly shot and killed; the next, seven weeks later, of a Chicago & Alton express at Blue Cut, Missouri, during which nobody was killed. It was the James Boys' last train robbery. On April 3rd, next, in 1882, Jesse was killed by the immortal little coward who shot Mister Howard—a thug named Robert Ford. Frank James gave himself up and reformed, if that is the word, dying in 1915 and leaving a widow who survived until July 6, 1944.

Once in a long while suspected train robbers were baited into a trap. A successful occasion of this sort was staged in 1888 on the Black Hills & Fort Pierre Railroad in South Dakota and was inspired by Alex McKenzie, paymaster for a logging outfit which had operations along the line. It was McKenzie's practice, once a month, to board a train at Lead, carrying

^{*}Being in Northfield several years ago, I was politely shown holes and marks made by bullets during the battle, and had the honor of shaking hands with one of the citizens who participated. I regret I did not make note of his name.

[†] See Chapter XXXVIII, "Ballads of the Rails."

in one hand a cowhide bag containing anywhere from ten to twenty thousand dollars, in the other hand a rifle. No attempt had been made to hold him up, so he started out on the September trip as usual, riding in the tiny caboose which followed a string of flats, two box cars and a locomotive in charge of Engineer John Cominsky.

At Galena Junction the train stopped to cut out the two box cars and take them to Galena, on a stub line, leaving the rest of the train at the Junction. McKenzie and his rich bag of gold and silver usually waited in the caboose for the locomotive to return, hook on, and proceed to Brownsville and Elk Canyon. On this day, however, he had business in Galena and rode in on the locomotive. Looking back he was surprised to see several horsemen charge out of the woods and chase the train, shouting like so many Indians. McKenzie remarked on this, but Engineer Cominsky thought nothing of it. "Cowboys," he said, "are damned fools and like to show off by racing trains."

A bit later that day McKenzie discovered the telegraph line beside the tracks had been cut. He wondered if this fact had any connection with the horsemen, and said as much next day to Superintendent Blackstone of the railroad. Blackstone believed the two items to be more than coincidence, and just before McKenzie was due to make the next pay trip, a come-on story was put in the local newspaper. It related, with typical local pride, that the October payroll was to be \$32,000 and it would go out to the logging camps on the 12th. Joe Koller, newspaperman of Lead, who knew participants in the affair, later told the story for the *Daily Argus-Leader* of Sioux Falls.

"This time," said Mr. Koller, "a combination express and smoker coach was coupled behind the engine. McKenzie seemed quite alone as he carried his valise aboard. The train pulled out as usual. On the outskirts of Lead it slowed for a switch, and there Deadwood Dick Bullock (the second of that name in these parts) and the late William A. Reimer, a young man of courage who later served as Lawrence County sheriff, climbed up the cab steps and settled down on the coal pile in the tender to await events.

"The attack came at a place later called Avalon. The engine, rounding a curve, rammed into a pile of ties. As it stopped it skidded off the spread rails. A shot heralded the cause of banditry in Jesse James style. Masked men pushed out of the trackside underbrush. At command the engineer and fireman jumped down and walked forward. Then gun thunder broke from the gangway and coal bin, and one of the masked men cried as a bullet from Bill Reimer's gun hit him.

"The bandits darted into the brush, and now began some fast shooting between them and the two guards. Bullets splattered against the locomotive and thudded into the coach, while Reimer and Bullock fired back. The bandits reached their horses and escaped—all but one, who was badly wounded and was taken in charge by the guards. They worked him over

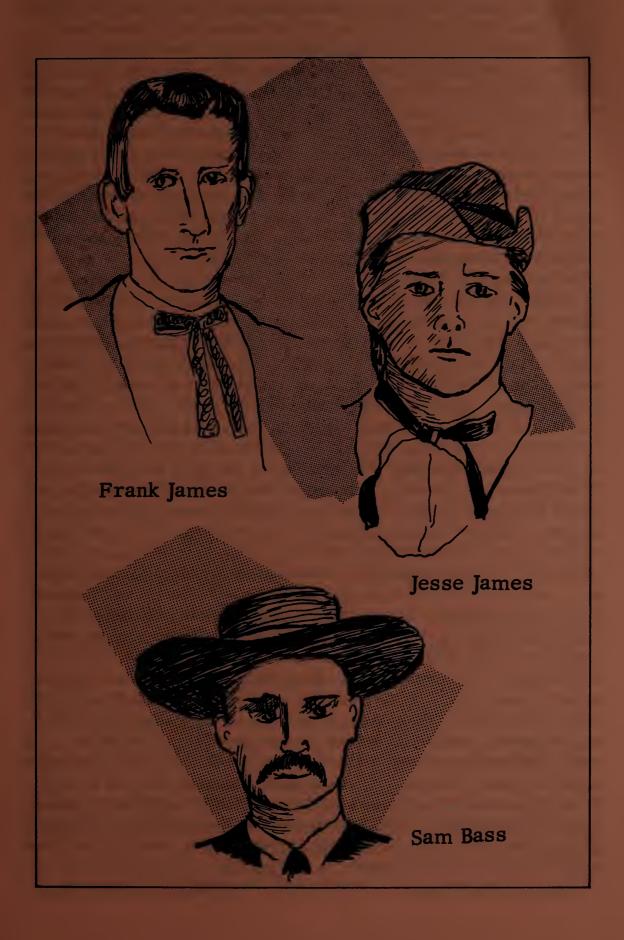
to such purpose that he divulged the names of his pals, and that night in Deadwood the rest of the gang was rounded up. All were convicted and sent to prison."

Before getting on to what were perhaps the most interesting train robbers in nineteenth-century America, it is necessary to mention Sam Bass, another Black Hills product, hero of the long, illiterate, hideous, and popular ballad that bears his name, if for no other reason than that Sam is one of the seven desperadoes to get into the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Sam, as the song relates, "come from Indiana" being born there on a most unfortunate day in 1851. He was not a scholarly fellow, admits one of his more infatuated biographers, and was unable to read or write at the time of his sudden death at the age of twenty-seven. He came to notoriety as a stage robber in the Black Hills, in 1877, committing the jobs for need of money to spend on race horses, faro banks, whores, and other necessities. In that same year he and four partners got into the big time by holding up a Union Pacific train at Big Springs, Nebraska, and cleaning the express car of more than \$65,000, a good haul then or now.

Fleeing to Texas, Bass and his companions went immediately to work, staging a series of holdups on the Houston & Texas Central and the Texas & Pacific roads, none of which paid off very well in cash, one job being as low as \$50. Turning to the field of banking, as had his betters, the James-Younger set, Bass was mortally wounded at Round Rock, Texas, by a member of the Texas Rangers, who thus contributed no little to the progress of civilization. Bass was properly buried at Round Rock, and the sentimental and gun-loving Texans put up a neat gravestone with a characteristic epitaph: "A Brave Man Reposes in Death Here. Why was he Not True?" The Sam Bass legend began at once and has grown steadily; and in the Lone Star state today one may, if one is not careful, be shown as many as one hundred and forty-six different revolvers, any and all of which are certified as being the gun last carried by the illiterate thug.*

I regret exceedingly that neither Christopher Evans nor John Sontag rate a sketch in the classic *Dictionary of American Biography*, for they belong there more than does Sam Bass and are as fitted for its pages as are Jesse James and Coleman Younger. Evans and Sontag had a deep and, to them—and to many others as well—a very proper motivation for their robberies on the Southern Pacific Railroad. That is, if they ever did any robbing at all. Theirs is a curious case. Neither was ever convicted of robbery, and although I believe they staged five very efficient stickups of SP trains, there is many a Californian to this day who will swear that the two men were hounded to prison or death merely because they opposed, or

^{*}In his Treasury of American Folklore, New York, 1944, B. A. Botkin has an amusing summary of the fantastic legends about Bass.



agitated against, a powerful railroad corporation. Whatever else they were or weren't, Evans and Sontag were the nearest to being indestructible of any human beings I can think of, offhand or after long deliberation.

To comprehend the cold hate that appears to have motivated Chris Evans it is necessary to know a little about the Southern Pacific Railroad of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. That road's policy, according to a fairminded and even friendly historian,* was to create and maintain a monopoly of transportation in California, and more, to exact from that monopoly "the utmost possible profit." Doubtless such a policy was not unusual among railroads of the time, but in the case of the SP it appears to have been administered with a cynicism and often with a brutality that would be hard to match. Living down the reputation it acquired during this period has been one of the most difficult things the management of the road has had to contend with these past forty years.

In building and acquiring its lines southward from San Francisco in the 1870's, the SP was subsidized by land grants along each side of its right-of-way. It announced that as soon as these lands had been properly surveyed and the titles validated, it would sell them to farmers at \$2.50 an acre. By this time immigrants already were squatting on the lands. Many had also begun legal proceedings to obtain titles of their own direct from the government. Probably most if not all of the settlers were prepared to buy from the railroad at the \$2.50 an acre price announced. But when the SP at last received clear titles to the lands of the grant, it put prices up, well up, and advertised the properties at \$10, \$25, even \$30 an acre.

Settlers up and down the San Joaquin Valley, through which the road ran to Los Angeles, were alarmed and naturally angry. They formed a number of Settlers' Rights Leagues, one of which in the Mussel Slough region of present Kings County, was led by John J. Doyle, a man of force and ability. Doyle attacked the railroad's title to the lands. Aided by the League, he took the fight through the federal courts in California, then appealed directly to the Interior Department in Washington. He was defeated at every turn. The railroad announced it would dispossess all "squatters" on its lands.

In May of 1880 came tragedy, blundering or planned, in either case dreadful. In a last attempt to stave off the blow that was about to fall, the settlers of Mussel Slough, led by Major Thomas McQuiddy, who had always counseled moderation, arranged a mass meeting and barbecue at the town of Hanford, which was to be addressed by David Smith Terry, celebrated as jurist, political figure of great and rash courage, and a duelist. On horseback and in buckboards the farmers and their families came in to town by the hundreds. On this particular day a United States Marshal, accompanied by a couple of deputies and also by one man who has been

^{*} Chapters in the History of the Southern Pacific, by Stuart Daggett, New York, 1922.

called an agent provocateur of the Southern Pacific, arrived in the neighborhood and set about immediately to dispossess several farmers.

On the place of a man named Brewer the marshal and his men were met by a number of farmers. The alleged SP man, one Crow, started shooting. The farmers shot back. When the smoke had cleared five farmers and two officers lay dead. For this "murder" of the officers seventeen farmers were tried, found guilty, and sent to prison.

The Mussel Slough tragedy was only the most spectacular of the many incidents that followed hard on the railroad's removal of settlers from lands they believed, and with considerable right, to be their own; and as such it served as the rallying cry of the San Joaquin valley farmers—Remember Mussel Slough!

Contrary to folklore that has grown up around the affair, and has even been put into books, Chris Evans was not dispossessed of his land by the railroad. Close relatives of his wife, however, lost their farms after the Mussel Slough incident and this unquestionably fanned the resentment, felt by all farmers in the region against the SP, of Evans, a highly intelligent and determined man. Born in Canada, reared in Vermont, Evans was thirty-three years old in 1880. He had served as a scout with the Army fighting Indians in the Dakotas, and had walked much of the way over Union Pacific and Central Pacific tracks into California in 1873, all of which was pretty good training for what was ahead.

Now married, and with children arrived and on the way, Evans worked for the Bank of California, having charge of three warehouses where he checked and graded grain that the bank took from farmers in payment on mortgages. The warehouses were at Goshen, Pixley, and Alila. (Mark those names; they were soon to be in the news.) In this job the sympathetic and reflective man heard a-plenty from farmers regarding the high-binder methods of the Southern Pacific—enough to change his resentment to hatred.

The warehouse job did not pay Evans enough to support his growing family, so he moved to Modesto where he opened a livery stable. (Mark the name of Modesto.) The stable presently burned with all its contents, including twenty-two animals. Evans gave up trying to be a business man. Taking his family he moved to a small tract of land near Visalia.

Evans had become acquainted with John Sontag, a tall, rugged man from Mankato, Minnesota, a sort of boomer railroadman who had been badly injured while braking for the Southern Pacific. Sontag claimed that neglect of his injury in the railroad company's hospital at Sacramento had maimed him for life. True or not, it was a fact that company hospitals of all kinds in that era were far from healthy places. Sontag limped badly and was unable to perform the rugged work to which the SP assigned him. He was as bitter against the railroad for this reason as Evans was for the lost acres of his wife's family.

Well, things began happening to the SP's trains on the cloudy evening of February 22, 1889. As Number 17 pulled out of Pixley, a village right handy to Mussell Slough, two masked men climbed over the coal in the locomotive tender and into the cab. Guns in hand they ordered the engineer to stop the train. He did, and he and the fireman were grounded under orders of the robbers, who now shouted to the man in the express car, Messenger Kelly, to throw out the safe. Kelly refused. "Very well," said the shorter of the two bandits. He placed a stick of dynamite under the car and a moment later it went off, lifting the car off the rails. Kelly was still game; he refused to toss out the safe or to unlock the doors. Whereupon the robbers announced they would shoot the engineer and fireman unless the safe was delivered. Out it came. The train crew had been milling around the stalled cars, and one of the robbers now shot and killed a trainman named Gabert, and wounded another man. The robbers told the train crew to take the train back to Pixley, which was done. When police came to the scene, perhaps half an hour later, the robbers had disappeared, along with perhaps \$5,000 from the express safe.

Eyewitnesses agreed there were only two robbers, one short and stocky. who seemed to direct things, the other a large man about six feet tall. No identification was made, no suspicion was engendered. Chris Evans, grain inspector at Pixley, continued to grade the wheat and barley. Almost a year later, this time near Goshen, where Evans inspected grain, a holdup of southbound Number 19 was accomplished with virtually the same methods used at Pixley, except that no shooting occurred and that the safe contained \$20,000. The railroad's detectives converged on the neighborhood from north and south but found never a clue, nor any sympathy from citizens who jeered them as hirelings of The Octopus. Then, on February 6, 1891, Number 17 was held up a second time, this job being done at Alila, just south of Pixley. There was no profit, for Messenger C. C. Haswell defied the robbers and replied with profane and obscene words to their demands to open the express car. Haswell also started shooting, blindly yet wickedly, through the grating of the express car's side doors. The robbers fled. Fireman Radcliffe died of wounds from bullets fired either by the messenger or by the robbers, nobody ever knew which.

But somebody had to be arrested and the cops, lacking a better, arrested the heroic Haswell and charged him with murdering the fireman. Haswell had to stand trial, too, even though he was speedily acquitted. And presently two more goats appeared. These were Bill and Gratton Dalton, of a gang already notorious in the Midwest. The two Daltons had been living for a while in the San Joaquin Valley, and now they were arrested, apparently on general principles, and Gratton was convicted of attempted robbery and of manslaughter on what would appear to have been the slimmest of evidence.

While Grat Dalton was still in jail, and Bill Dalton out on bail, the SP

robbers struck again, this time near Modesto, a town a hundred miles north of the scene of the other robberies and incidentally the place to which Evans had removed and was even then operating a livery stable. (To be done with the Daltons, Gratton walked quietly and successfully out of his cell in one of the easiest deliveries of record, then went back to Kansas to die in the raid on Coffeyville, little more than a year later.) The Modesto attack, even to two dynamite attempts on the express car, was much like the others, only this time two SP detectives, Harris and Lawton, who were on the train, got into the battle. There was considerable shooting, during which Detective Harris received a bad wound. The bandits, one short, one tall, got away clean, though without any cash.

The Evans Livery Stable in Modesto burned at about this time, and Evans moved to Visalia, as related. Nearly a year went by with no holdups on the SP. What proved to be the next and last of the series took place at midnight, August 3, 1892, just west of Fresno, a town much nearer to Visalia, if that had any significance, than to Modesto. The train was old Number 17 again. The routine was basically the same—the two robbers climbing into the cab over the coal, the application of dynamite to the express car, defended with great courage by Messenger George D. Roberts until the explosions knocked him unconscious; then the moving of 125 pounds of silver coin into a buggy that was waiting in the road near the tracks, and the disappearance of the robbers.

It is not difficult to imagine that by this time the men of Wells, Fargo & Company, of the Southern Pacific, and to a lesser degree the police officers of the counties where the holdups had occurred, were one and all knowing the sneers and jeers of the public and feeling the heat applied by their own higher-ups. Combining forces, public, express, and railroad detectives and police started looking for suspects and arresting them. A kind of hysteria must have taken them, for within two days after the Fresno holdup, some

fifty-odd men were in various jails in the San Joaquin Valley.

In Visalia at this time was one George Sontag, a dudish punk who seemed to have little if any occupation other than running off at the mouth. Much of his talk concerned the hellish Southern Pacific which, among many other derelictions, had treated his brother, John, in a most brutal manner. He liked to talk about it, did George. And George also said he had been a passenger on Number 17 when it had been held up near Fresno a few days previously. Detective Will Smith of the Southern Pacific took the garrulous fellow in hand for a questioning. Sontag became confused, and made contradictory statements regarding his brother John. Leaving George Sontag in the sheriff's office under guard, Detective Smith, accompanied by Deputy Sheriff Witty, went to Chris Evans' home on the outskirts of Visalia. As they were tying their team to a post in front of the place, the two officers saw John Sontag enter the Evans' home from the back door.

Smith and Witty walked up to the front porch. The door was open. Without knocking or making themselves known in any way, the officers stepped inside and into the living room, startling Eva Evans, sixteen, blond haired, brown-eyed and pretty elder daughter of Chris Evans. With more speed than finesse Smith went about his work. "I want to see John Sontag," he said. The girl replied that Sontag wasn't there; nor did she know that he was, for he had then barely entered the back door of the house. Then Detective Smith, patently no Chesterfield, remarked that the girl was "a damned little liar." *

As shocked as she was astonished, Eva Evans turned and ran out of the house, toward the barn, where her father was. She met him coming in and told him two strangers had walked unannounced into the house, and that one of them had called her a bad name. Evans was a man of sudden temper, and this time, perhaps, he had reason for his choler. He strode through the back door, noticed a revolver with which Eva had been shooting at a target a little while before, and picked it up. He put it into his pocket, then went into the living room.

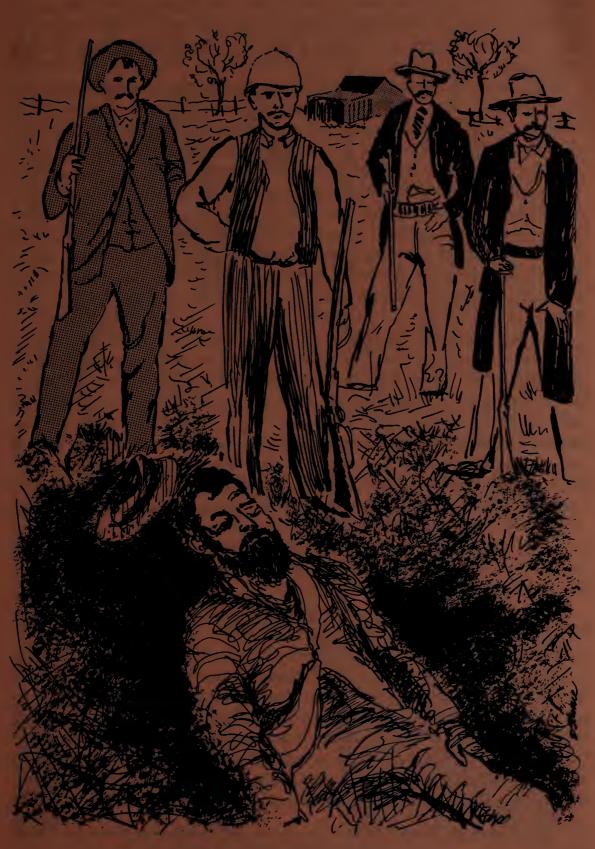
Shooting began at once, with all three men engaged and with John Sontag presently taking a hand. Who fired first is beyond knowing. The results: Deputy Sheriff Witty down in the road in front of the house, badly hit; Detective Smith, mildly wounded and running toward town; and Evans and John Sontag getting into the officers' wagon and driving off.

Now began the greatest manhunt California had known. It was to last a year and a half. Some three thousand men were to engage in it, and it was to end only with the death of John Sontag, by then virtually weighted with lead, and the capture of Evans, minus an eye, an arm, and scarred and pitted by many bullets.

From the Evans home the two men drove toward the Sierras, a large posse of mounted men hot on the trail. A few miles out of town the outlaws drove into a meadow behind some haystacks and waited for the posse to gallop by, returned to the Evans home, enjoyed a substantial supper, then proceeded to load up the buggy with provisions for a long stay in the mountains. Just as they were about to leave, Deputy Sheriff Overall and two other officers came up. It was too dark to see much, but both sides started to shoot and Deputy Sheriff Oscar Beaver was killed. Evans and Sontag now drove away into the hills to eastward.

Meanwhile, George Sontag had been convicted, on almost no evidence at all, of having had a part in the last Southern Pacific robbery. He was sent to Folsom prison. At the instigation of her father, who was seldom long out of touch with his family, Eva Evans and other sympathizers planned a

^{*} In his account of the case, the best I know of, C. G. Glasscock remarks that it is important to bear in mind the brutal approach of Detective Smith, if events immediately subsequent are to be judged fairly. See his Bandits and the Southern Pacific, New York, 1929.



. . . the deputies stood over him . . .

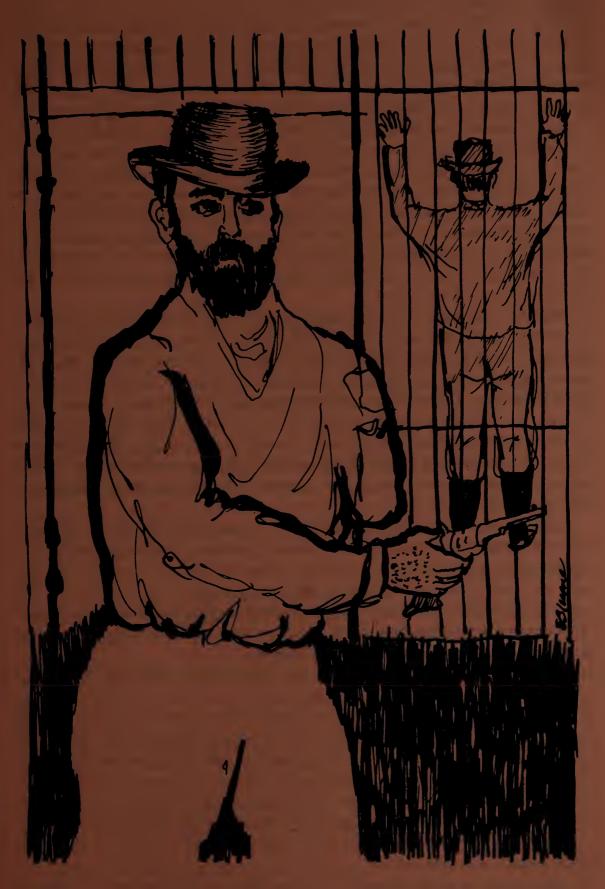
prison delivery for George Sontag. Just how it was arranged isn't too clear, but anyway, on June 27, 1893, George Sontag and three other convicts who were working in the prison rock quarry suddenly picked guns out of thin air and started shooting at their guards. It looked good for a moment, but not longer. Guards shot them all down, killing all but Sontag who was merely crippled for life.

Meanwhile, too, Evans and Sontag were holding their own in fine shape. Once, possibly twice, they drove into Visalia at night, and once had to shoot their way through a cordon of cops around the Evans home. Mostly, though, the two men stayed in the hills, and here they lived very well, eating at logging camps. where no questions were asked, and with miners. The United States Government and the Southern Pacific Railroad hired marshals and police by the score. Two Indian trackers were brought into the chase. So was a pack of hounds. The woods came to be so filled with armed men that they took to shooting at each other, and at least eleven deputies were wounded by other deputies. The Southern Pacific and Wells, Fargo & Company combined to offer a \$10,000 reward for the two men, dead or alive.

At a place called Young's Cabin, Evans and Sontag were almost taken by a posse but managed to shoot out of it. A bit later came a terrific battle at Stone Corral, where United States Marshal George Gard and a posse lay in wait for the outlaws. The officers were all hidden in a cabin. As soon as Evans and Sontag came into range, one of the more nervous deputies opened fire. The two outlaws dropped down behind a pile of straw and manure and there for the next several hours they remained, shooting and being shot at—and hit. Sontag received bullets through his right arm, two or three in his side and chest, and a number of flesh wounds. Evans' left arm was all but shot away, hanging in shreds. A charge of buckshot struck his head fair and took out his right eye. Another bullet caught him in the right shoulder. The outlaws' own shots had merely wounded one of the officers.

Marshal Gard and his men, knowing the two outlaws to be badly wounded, prepared to wait out the night. Sontag had become so weak he could not lift a hand; and as dusk fell, Evans started to creep away into the nearby woods. The officers detected the move and opened fire, and Evans managed to shoot back once. Then he disappeared. As for Sontag, he began to chill notably from loss of blood. Toward morning he revived a little and tried to kill himself, but he was so weak and the revolver so heavy the first bullet merely plowed his temple. The next shot went through his face, just back of the nose. He faded again and remembered nothing until the deputies stood over him. They took him to the Visalia jail * and there

^{*} Information as to Sontag's last hours came to the author from Eva Evans McCullough herself, who was to have married him and who talked with him in the jailhouse just before he died.



He forced the jailer to let him out.

he presently died weighted, said the attending physician, with more lead than he had ever seen in a human being before.

Up in the hills, Evans, as soon as he received the cover of night and the woods, plodded on. His clothing soaked with blood, both arms hanging by his sides, one of them mere strips of flesh and bone, and with three shots embedded in his head, Vermont's sole contribution to California banditry started a journey that was termed by a contemporary an "amazing instance of human endurance and will power." Stumbling through the dark of a mountain night, Evans somehow traveled six miles in deep woods to reach a cabin occupied by a Perkins family. From here, where he lay in bed, white from loss of blood, he sent a Perkins boy to Sheriff Kay in Visalia with word that he, Evans, was prepared to give up without more ado, with the understanding that the reward for his capture should go to his wife. Officers came to take him out. In jail his left arm was amputated, and a bit later he was tried and convicted of the murder of one of the posse near the Evans' home.

The trial was held in Fresno. Before he could be removed to prison, a gun was smuggled in to Evans. With it he forced the jailer to let him out; and then, with his accomplice, one Ed Morrell, Evans took to the hills again. The chase began all over. Handicapped with an artificial arm, and blind in one eye, the outlaw managed to keep out of the hands of the many posses. The officers patently had given up the idea they could take him by force. Instead, they sent a faked message to him to the effect that one of his children was seriously ill and was pleading to see her father. Evans came home at once and was there captured by a posse large enough to have stormed a fort.

While Evans was in jail, R. C. White, a playwright of San Francisco, wrote and produced a melodrama, Evans & Sontag. At the time no other explanation was needed to tell what the play was about. Evans and Sontag were as widely known—and incidentally more favorably—than even the names of the Big Four of the Southern Pacific. Playwright White offered Mrs. Chris Evans and daughter Eva 25 per cent of the net receipts if they would play parts in the show. They agreed.

Mrs. Evans disliked the business, even though her part was small. Eva took to the stage like a born trouper. And Eva sat them up in their seats. On a fine black horse she galloped on stage just as the two actors playing the parts of Evans and Sontag rushed from their hiding place in the woods to greet her. From this point on the play was pretty much one shot after another. The San Francisco Examiner featured its drama critic's report with headlines of studhorse size: "Like the Roar of Battle—The Evans and Sontag Drama at the National Theater a Perfect Volley of Musketry—Eva Evans Given a Genuinely Enthusiastic Reception and Proves to be an Actress."

"Of course, it was the rankest melodrama," Eva Evans McCullough

told me fifty-four years later. "I can smile now, looking back at the blood and thunder of it. But I was not then conscious of the cheapness of the play. I was earning money for my father's court battle. That was what counted. We had to pay many lawyers."

But the lawyers could not save Chris Evans. In 1894 he was sentenced to Folsom prison for life. In 1911 he was paroled by Governor Hiram Johnson, no lover of the SP. Evans and family moved to Portland, Oregon, where he often sat sunning himself on a bench in the park blocks, often in company with Frank Coulter, a violin maker whom he had known in Modesto many years before. "Evans," the late Mr. Coulter told me, "was a soft-spoken and genial sort of man. It was hard for me to look at him, to hear him talk, and think that this was the man who had successfully defied the Southern Pacific and the State of California—at that time almost the same thing—for so many years, and took on the United States Government to boot. I came to know him well, but he never so much as intimated he had ever robbed a train."

When I met Eva Evans McCullough in 1947, I saw a good looking, genial and neat woman of seventy or so, as vibrant as most women half her age. Obviously she inherited the intellectual bent of her father, a man who read Darwin, Huxley, Shakespeare and Herbert Spencer—probably the only man ever credited with train robbery who had a working knowledge of those titans.

"Dad really did love good books," Mrs. McCullough said. "Even when the family had little more than shelter, clothing and food, there were books in our house. Dad read them, too, and I learned from him to love books. On only one occasion did I ever hear him use profanity, nor would he permit his children to use it.

"During his years in prison he wrote a book which he called Eurasia. It was not, as you might expect, a diatribe against the Southern Pacific. It was a plan for a wise and rational government, one of those Utopian republics. He outlined the political, educational and industrial arrangements. Women were to play an equal part with men in all things. The courts were to be simplified. Dad had ideas about prisons, not their abolishment by any means, nor to make them pleasant hotels for lazy or vicious persons; but to make them institutions of genuine reform. The little book was published by the San Francisco Star. It was far ahead of its time. Dad was an incurable idealist."

Chris Evans died in 1917, in Portland, Oregon, the last of the great train robbers—if robber he was—of the old school, and certainly the most unusual of them. He remains pretty much unknown except on the Pacific coast and to experts in the history of holding up the steam cars.

During the period of the many holdups of SP trains in California, a rather astonishing robber turned up in the effete East. He was Oliver C.

Perry. Although nearly all trains robberies have been committed by gangs of from two to ten men, Perry was a lone wolf and a most spectacular one. He was an Amsterdam, New York, boy, born in 1865, who went West and worked as cowboy and small-time robber, winding up in a cell in the Minnesota Penitentiary for pilfering a store. On his release he returned to his native state and in Troy, so the story goes, met an estimable young woman. one Amelia Haswell, who taught a Bible class. She worked hard to make Perry a good Christian, helping him to get a job on the New York Central as brakeman. Falling in love with the girl, and lacking sufficient money on which to marry, but characteristically not wanting to work for wages to earn it, Perry cooked up a plan to rob a train.

On September 30, 1891, a special express of ten cars pulled out of the Grand Central in Manhattan for Buffalo. At Albany, where a stop to change engines was made, Perry, a small man, got into the front vestibule of a richly-laden car in charge of Messenger E. A. Moore. He sawed through the door, stuck a gun in Moore's face, picked up a package containing "several thousand dollars in currency," then returned to the platform, where he reached down and cut the hose of the airbrake coupling. The train came to a stop and the robber leaped off, and away.

It had all been so easy. Five months later he did it again. This time he got aboard at Syracuse and took his stand on the head platform of the money car, in charge of Messenger Daniel McInerney. When the train pulled out, Perry strapped his valise and derby hat to the railing. He put on a mask. Then he strung a sort of patent rope ladder of his own devising to the top of the car, letting it hang down over one side. Now he swung out on the ladder, a truly precarious place, where he could peer through the side-door windows to watch the messenger and pick a good time to break in.

Here, indeed, was something new and ingenious in the business of robbing trains. Perry clung to the rope ladder on the outside of the express car while the train picked up speed. Thirty, forty, finally fifty miles an hour was being clicked off. The time was February, and Perry's hands got so cold he could hardly remove the gun from his pocket. The wind blew him away from the car a number of times, and he barely missed being scraped off by a bridge. He rubbed his hands vigorously, then managed to get out his gun and cock it, meanwhile watching through the windows to mark the movements of the messenger.

Near Weedsport Perry saw his chance. He opened the unlocked door. swung in neatly, his gun ready. Messenger McInerney reached for his own gun, and Perry fired. The bullet grazed the messenger, who then reached for the bellcord, yanking it before Perry could shoot him down. Perry hurriedly picked up some packages that looked valuable. Just then Conductor Haas, who had heard the air whistle sound faintly, climbed onto the rail of the platform of the express car and peered through the bellcord hole.

He could see a masked man, which was enough. Haas set the brakes. The train slowed down, and stopped. Haas stuck his head out to take a look ahead along the cars, and just then bullets began whistling. Perry ordered the conductor to signal the engineer to go ahead. He did.

At Port Byron a stop was made and the express car investigated. The messenger, though living, was badly hurt. There was no sign of the robber. Wiring ahead to Rochester for an ambulance to meet the train, it went on. It had to stop briefly at Lyons, and at Lyons, in the crowd at the depot, was a young man wearing gold-rimmed spectacles and carrying a valise strapped over one shoulder. One of the trainmen had noticed this young man at the Syracuse depot, and now he wondered how he had got to Lyons so quickly. He started to question him. Perry, for it was he, pulled a gun. He backed across the tracks until he came to a coal train, steam up, ready to leave. He uncoupled the locomotive, drove off the engine crew, then got into the cab and started on a journey such as railroad men swear no other train robber ever made.

Conductor Haas and a switchman had got hold of shotguns. They uncoupled the engine of the special, got aboard, and started in pursuit of the bandit engineer. The New York Central, even in 1892, was a fourtrack road, and the two engines sped along on different tracks. As Perry's locomotive began to lose ground, the other coming up fast, the bandit threw his engine into reverse, then poured a stream of bullets into the other engine as it passed him. Three or four times the two locomotives passed and repassed each other. Haas and the switchman got into action with their shotguns. Perry kept up an erratic fire until he saw his engine was almost out of steam. He stopped it, leaped off and ran.

Haas and his engine returned to Lyons, where the sheriff organized a posse and set out. They ran the bandit to earth not far from Newark. A bit later he pleaded guilty at Rochester and was sent up for 49 years to Auburn prison. Although he soon escaped, and was taken again, Perry never robbed another train. He died as recently as September 10, 1930, in the Dannemora State Prison for the Criminal Insane. His feat with a rope ladder and his escape in the stolen locomotive are generally held to have been unique in the annals of train robbery.

By the time Perry was safely put away, and Evans and Sontag had quit robbing trains, the profession of train robbery was on the downgrade. Well-made and extra heavy express cars doubtless had an effect in discouraging the practice. Train robberies dropped from 29 in 1900 to seven in 1905. Nor did they ever increase much again. There were, however, a few spectacular affairs after 1905, and two of the outstanding jobs occurred on the much-robbed Southern Pacific. On March 13, 1912, two men made the fatal mistake of holding up the Sunset Express on the San Antonio-El Paso run at a water stop called Dryden, in Texas. David A.

Trousdale was the Wells Fargo messenger aboard. He inveigled one of the two bandits into stooping over to pick up from the floor what Trousdale told him was a valuable package. As he did so, Trousdale picked up a heavy mallet that was used for cracking ice and let go a blow so mighty it killed the thug then and there.

The other thug was outside the car, on the track. Picking up the dead man's rifle, Trousdale waited until he saw a good chance, then drilled the second thug neatly through the head. It was noble work, work more likely to give parasites pause than any amount of moral suasion and pious words. Two murderous parasites dead in two minutes. The train crew, glad to be helpful, tossed the second body into the express car with the other, and the *Sunset Express* went on, a little late but still intact, and with Messenger Trousdale cleaning up the mussed-up car. One of the dead men proved to be Gil Fitzpatrick, said to have been the last of the Hole-inthe-Wall Gang, terrors in their day. The other was one Ed Welch.

Wells Fargo presented a gold watch, suitably inscribed, to Messenger Trousdale; and passengers contributed to purchase a gold watch fob, "with a diamond set in a Texas star" for the brave man. Twenty-three years afterward, thanks to the unremitting labor of the Rev. A. N. Eshman, minister of a church in Trousdale's old home town of Columbia, Tennessee, Congress considered the matter and awarded one thousand dollars to the messenger who had safeguarded registered mail valued at \$66,000. In February of 1946, according to an interview with him in the Erie Railroad Magazine, Trousdale, still hale and rugged, had just retired after 43 years on the rails, all spent in the service of Railway Express and predecessor concerns.

I could wish that some ballad maker of the hillbilly school, which has celebrated in song nearly all of the thugs and parasites of the South and Southwest, would be inspired by the cold courage displayed by Dave Trousdale to give us a dozen or so strophes entitled "The Brave Wells Fargo Man," dedicated to him who so deftly exterminated two roaches at Dryden, Texas, in 1912.

Another lone robber of the Oliver Perry school, but of much later date, was the once well-publicized William J. Carlisle of Wyoming. He specialized in Union Pacific trains, holding up four of them and each time forced members of the train crew to pass the hat among the passengers for their cash and valuables. All of his robberies were committed in 1916, and in that year the law caught up and sent him to prison. But he was no businessman. His total loot amounted to less than a thousand dollars.

Worse than Carlisle as businessmen, but virtually sadistic in their one crime, were three brothers named D'Autremont who in 1923 stopped a Southern Pacific train at Siskiyou Pass in Oregon. Unquestionably influenced by having seen too many Western movies, these three punks shot



The mighty blow killed the thug . . .

and killed the engineer and one trainman, killed the messenger by heaving dynamite into his car, then fled without a penny. All three were taken and sent to the Oregon pen. Within six months of their incarceration some moron had composed a long ballad sentimentalizing them. I don't think it has survived, and am quite happy it didn't.

